

On the Sixth Psalm, Concerning the Octave
St. Gregory of Nyssa



1. [J. 187 & M. 608] Those persons who are advancing from strength to strength according to the prophet's blessing [Ps 83 83.6-8] and who dispose their hearts for these noble ascents, whenever they apprehend some good thought, they are led to a loftier understanding which yields for the soul an ascent on high. Thus, he who always stretches forward [Phil 3.13]) will never cease his good ascent through lofty thoughts to be ever guided to comprehend transcendent reality. I have mentioned these things to you, brothers, who turn your attention to the sixth psalm and its important role in the order of the psalter: after the inheritance,¹ the psalm pertaining to the octave is offered to us. Indeed, you are not ignorant of the symbol of the octave, which does not concur with those opinions held by the Jews. With respect to the unbecoming members of our bodies, they degrade the nobility of the mystery of the octave, the law of circumcision and [M. 609] purification following childbirth; they claim that the number [J. 188] eight signifies these things. However, we learn from the great Paul that the Law is spiritual [Rom 7.14], provided that the observance keeps this number eight and prescribes circumcision for male children and a sacrifice of purification for females. We neither reject the Law nor accept it blindly, knowing that true circumcision administered by a stone knife occurs on the eighth day. You indeed know that the stone knife which severs impurity is Christ [1 Cor 10.4], the true Word [of God] and that it brings to an end the sordid flow of this life's actions once our human existence has been changed into a more divine state.

2. To clarify these matters, I will now set forth their meaning. The time of this life in the first constitution of creation is fulfilled in one week, which consists of seven days. The creation of beings began on the first day, and the completion of creation terminated on the seventh day. Scripture says that the first beings were created on one day [Gen 1.5], and on the second day, the second beings were created, and so forth until the sixth day, when all the rest were created. The seventh day is the end of creation and encompasses within itself the time coextensive with the creation of this world. Therefore, no other heaven was made except this one, and no parts of the world were added to those which were made at the beginning. Still, creation was established in itself while remaining in its dimensions without augmentation or diminution. Thus, no other time existed except that which was determined with creation, for the nature of time is circumscribed in the week of days. [J. 189] When we measure time with days, beginning from the first and closing with the seventh again, we return to the first day. We always measure the totality of time through the circle of seven days until things endowed with motion pass away and the flux of the world's movement ceases. There will come, as the Apostle says [1 Cor 7.31], the things that are no longer tossed about, for they suffer neither change nor alteration: this creation will always remain like itself in succeeding ages. It contains the true circumcision of human nature and true purification, which will strip away this earthly life. Sin is this filth produced in human nature (because "In sin, my mother conceived me " [Ps 50.5]. He [Christ] who purified us from sin next cleansed the universe and utterly destroyed from creatures everything that is bloody, sordid, and uncircumcised. Thus, we accept the law concerning the octave, which cleanses and circumcises because once time represented by the number seven comes to a close, the octave succeeds it.

This day is called the eighth because it follows the seventh [M. 612] and is no longer subject to numerical succession. Another sun makes this day, the true sun which enlightens; since this sun enlightens once and for all, as the Apostle says [2 Cor 4.4], sunset no longer hides it, but it enfolds all things in its own brilliant power. This light continuously makes light for those persons worthy of it and even makes other suns out of everyone who shares in it [J. 190]. As the Gospel says, "The just will shine like the sun" [Mt 13.43]

3. In the previous psalm [five], the inheritance of the octave is kept for persons worthy of it. This psalm distributes God's just judgment to each person according to his worthiness, and the prophet [David] rightly includes repentance by mentioning the octave. For whose conscience is not at once troubled and gripped by fear and terror when mindful of Christ's fearful judgment and with the knowledge that he should change for the better? But when he considers the rigour of judgment, which involves detailed questioning, in expectation of a dreadful outcome, he is terrified, not knowing the outcome of his judgment. Therefore, his eyes are riveted on a fearful punishment: Gehenna, dark fire, the undying worm of conscience [Mt 8.12], which constantly makes the soul moan through shame and renews its pains by the memory of evil deeds. Now, the suppliant beseeches God, praying that he may not be subject to his wrath at the cross-examination nor suffer chastisement for offences through God's anger. For judgment is considered to be the effect of wrath and anger with regard to persons condemned to a fierce chastisement of that dreadful punishment. Now, psalm [six] represents by words of grief and pain the wrath and fury attributed to the punishment of wicked persons. It says [J. 191] I do not expect from [God's] wrath any reproach concerning my hidden sins by means of fearful stripes: rather, I anticipate anguish from my own confession. The grief resulting from the wounds of stripes manifests hidden iniquities; one's own free will affects punishment and chastisement through repentance and by making any hidden sin public.

4. When Psalm Six says, "Rebuke me not in your wrath nor chastise me in your anger" [vs. 1], the psalmist seeks refuge in mercy: not so much with regard to [man's] free choice, but with respect to the weakness of human nature, the cause of evil. Although I was born in evil, I am healed by [God's] mercy. Weakness causes me pain. What is this weakness? My bones are shaken, and health has vanished from them. [Psalm Six] says that [M. 613] sound thoughts steady the soul: "Heal me, Lord, because my bones are troubled" [vs. 2]. The symbolism of these words is explained in relation to those which follow: "My soul is exceedingly troubled" [vs. 3]. Why are you slow to cure me, Lord? How long will you withhold mercy? Do you not see the fleetness of human life? Remove the constraint to which our life is subject by converting my soul so that when death overtakes us, we can still be healed. No longer will a person whose sickness stems from evil and who can be healed by the memory of God suffer death because his confession belongs on earth, not in hell.

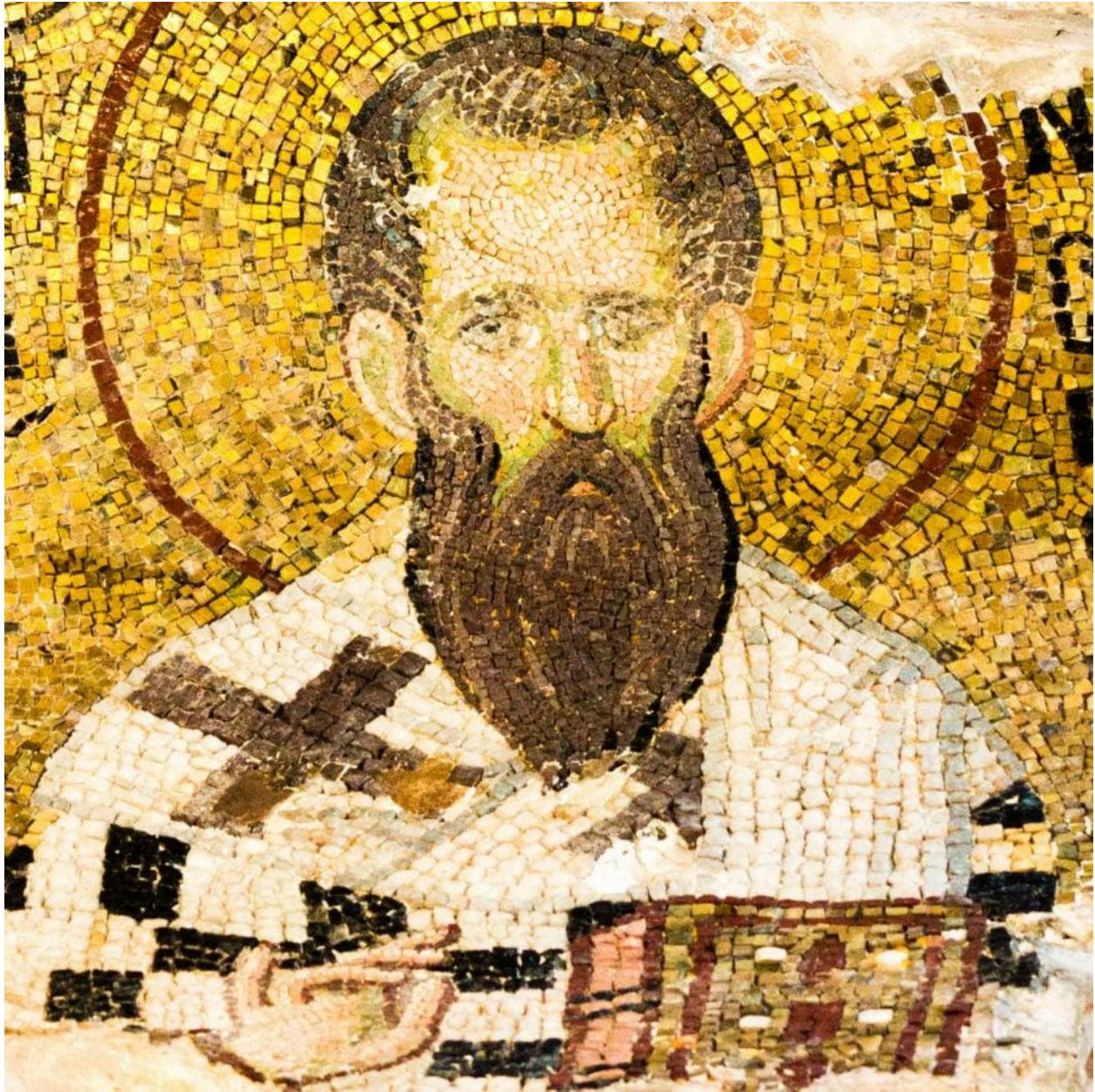
5. Then we hear words such as, How can you implore mercy from correcting transgressions? How can you placate God? Psalm Six says, " I have laboured with my groaning, and I shall wash my bed from sin with the water of my tears" [vs. 6] Why are these things so? Because the psalm claims that in wrath my [J. 192] eye is troubled, and I have become old and subject to decay because the wrath of my enemies towards my soul has brought about this decay. Suppose wrath alone causes such fear for an offender. How much greater will the hope of salvation be for those in despair who not only recognize the pains from wrath in their own lives but those caused by passion, greed, delusion, ambition, jealousy, and the entire swarm of human evils? With respect to these various enemies, Psalm Six says, "Depart from me, all you who work iniquity" [vs. 8]. It later shows the good hope offered to us from conversion. Right away, the psalm speaks of conversion to God and comes to perceive God's goodwill for a person. It proclaims his grace and announces his bounty by saying. "The Lord has heard the voice of my petition; the Lord has accepted my prayer" [vs. 9].

The psalmist prays for his enemies' conversion once they have been castigated through shame so that the benefit of conversion might remain forever and that a person no longer needs it. For the person who puts his hands to evil is shamed; by training, he no longer is familiar with evil and will refrain from similar future temptations. Such is the fruit of a good ascent. The fourth psalm makes a distinction between the immaterial and bodily, fleshly good; the fifth psalm, [J. 193], prays for the inheritance of this good; the sixth psalm mentions the octave, the time for this inheritance; the eighth psalm sets before one's eyes the fearful judgment which warns us sinners to shun by repentance more calamitous results. Then, the repentance duly offered to God proclaims [M. 616] a benefit for us: "The Lord has listened to my voice with tears when I turned to him" [vs. 9]. Once this has come about and this benefit may abide for the future, the prophet [David] beseeches [God] to destroy hostile thoughts through shame. Such lawless, hostile thoughts cannot otherwise be vanquished unless through shame. A deep gulf is established for those persons who have lived in evil, while shame has erected a wall of sin in oneself. We, therefore, say, "Let all my enemies be put to shame and sorely troubled" (vs. 10). My enemies are domestic ones and proceed from my heart to defile a person. By quickly vanquishing them with shame, our hope of glory which is free from this shame will receive thanks be to God, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Source: Casimir McCambley, *GREEK ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL REVIEW* Volume 32, No. 1, 1987, pp. 39-50.

*A note regarding the text, On the Sixth Psalm, Concerning the Octave: Within the text are located the letters "M" and "J." "M" refers to Migne's edition, PG 44; "J " refers to the critical text done under Werner Jaeger's direction and continued after his death (Leiden, 1962), vol. 5. James McDonough s.j. has arranged the critical text for this volume.

1. This refers to the inscription to Psalm Five: "For the end, a psalm of David, concerning her that inherits."



Byzantine mosaic of the church father Gregory of Nyssa, Pammakaristos church, Istanbul Turkey.